

H. P. R.

Brother says Ray conscious

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — James Earl Ray, the convicted killer of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., came out of a coma Thursday and was laughing and talking in his hospital bed, his brother said.

"He looked 100 percent better," Jerry Ray said after leaving the hospital. "He's talking and everything."

Ray, 68, who suffers from liver and kidney damage and had been in a coma for days, was upgraded from critical to serious condition at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital.

"It is still serious, but he seems to be more stable," said Cheryl Goforth, the hospital's chief operating officer, refusing to comment further.

Jerry Ray said the change isn't really a turnaround because doctors have told him that his brother would be drifting in and out of consciousness.

He wasn't able to finish sentences, but Jerry Ray said his brother smiled at jokes about bringing alcohol and a woman to his hospital room.

"He's in a good mood, laughing with a big grin, and I figure if he's in a good mood, he should stay in a good mood."

He didn't talk with his brother about anything serious, but said doctors have given his brother only a 10 percent chance of survival, even if they perform surgery.

Even with surgery, "the most he'd

live is up to a year," Jerry Ray said.

He didn't know what kind of surgery they were considering and doctors did not respond Thursday to a request for an interview.

Jerry Ray said his brother isn't on life support, but that he will approve it if necessary. On Wednesday, he said he changed his mind about not authorizing life support after talking with others who don't believe Ray was the assassin.

Ray, a white petty criminal, admitted to shooting King on April 4, 1968, while the civil rights leader stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

Ray recanted the confession three days after he made it and has argued for a new trial even as he serves a 99-year prison sentence.

Jerry Ray and James Earl Ray's attorneys are hoping a hearing in February will start the process of clearing him in King's death. The hearing won't go forward if James Earl Ray dies.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson said earlier this week that he was hoping for a deathbed confession from Ray. Rev. Jackson said he never believed Ray acted alone and blames authorities for allowing conspirators to escape.

Ray's brother said he hopes Rev. Jackson doesn't hold his breath waiting because "he won't confess to something he didn't do."

James Earl Ray was serving time at Riverbend Maximum-Security Prison until last weekend, when he was transferred from a prison medical hospital.

Andrew Hall, a lawyer representing James Earl Ray, said he sued the state claiming officials at Riverbend State Prison wouldn't treat the prisoner for stomach problems he suffered this summer.

"He's been asking for treatment for a year," Mr. Hall said. "They've been refusing to give treatment or a diagnosis to see what is wrong."